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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at the Trumbull Campus (TC) of Kent State University, in Ohio, to gather data on factors influencing students' decisions not to return to college after completing one semester. Surveys were mailed to 767 students who attended TC in either fall 1992 or spring 1993 but did not re-enroll in the following semester. Study findings, based on student records and surveys received from 98 former students, included the following: (1) of the 767 students, 452 were female, 447 were freshmen, and 308 were white; (2) for the 98 respondents, 40 cited transfer to another institution as a main reason for not returning; (3) 48 of the respondents cited scheduling difficulties, with conflict with work schedules indicated most often; (4) family responsibilities were cited by 53 students, including child care needs, elder care needs, and family and personal illness or accident; and (5) financial reasons for not returning were reported by 76 respondents, giving this category the most number of responses. Based on responses, it was determined that an estimated one-third of potential non-returning students could be retained by offering child care services, expanded course offerings, and a weekend college. (Includes students comments to open-ended questions.) (KP)

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Why Students Don't Return

An investigation of reasons why students choose not to come back to college

Survey Results, Conclusions, and Implications

Kent State University Trumbull Campus

December 1993

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Conclusions and Summary

This study investigated the factors in students' decisions not to return to Kent Trumbull after completion of a semester. Two groups of non-returning students were used as a survey population. Surveys were sent to each of the 767 students. Ninety-eight or almost 33% of those surveyed responded.

The two groups of non-returning students surveyed were:

> **(333) students who attended the Kent Trumbull Campus in the Fall semester of 1992 and did not re-enroll in the Spring semester 1993.**
>
> **(434) students who attended Spring semester 1993 and did not return in the Fall semester 1993.**

Demographic data is displayed in the investigations text.

There is clear evidence that the campus can retain a substantial (an estimated 1/3) number of students, who would otherwise not return, by offering child care services, expanding course offerings and establishing a weekend college.

Several general conclusions were apparent from an analysis of the demographic data:

> **- students who delay their entrance into higher education are more sensitive to factors affecting their choices not to return.**
>
> **- first semester freshmen are the most likely to not return**

The survey responses indicate:

> **Students decide not to return primarily because the expense is beyond their resources**
>
> **Students have responsibilities within their families**

Students are unable to schedule because of work conflicts, class times and course selections

Students transfer to other institutions.

Strategies most likely to affect non-returning students are those designed to provide and/or increase direct student supports such as:

Child care

Psychological counseling

Increased financial aid opportunities

Additionally, the survey results indicate increasing and varying course offerings and scheduling, particularly:

An expanded evening and weekend schedule of course offerings.

Additional upper division course offerings

NON-RETURNING STUDENT STUDY

The purpose for undertaking this investigation was to gain information about students who do not return to college after completing a preceding semester. The study also sought to identify reasons why students do not continuously attend Kent Trumbull. Non-returning students were surveyed in two groups.

> **Students who attended the Kent Trumbull Campus in the Fall semester of 1992 and did not re-enroll in the Spring semester 1993.**
>
> **Students who attended Spring semester 1993 and did not return in the Fall semester 1993.**

The chart below depicts the Fall and Spring semester enrollment trends of Kent Trumbull between 1979 and 1993.

As illustrated in Figure 1. the enrollment trend for the Trumbull campus has shown a continuous increase starting in 1990. These increases come at a time when Kent State University as a system has experienced declines in new freshmen enrollments. These current enrollment trends and the pressures placed on the institution as a result, emphasize the importance of understanding and addressing the reasons why students do

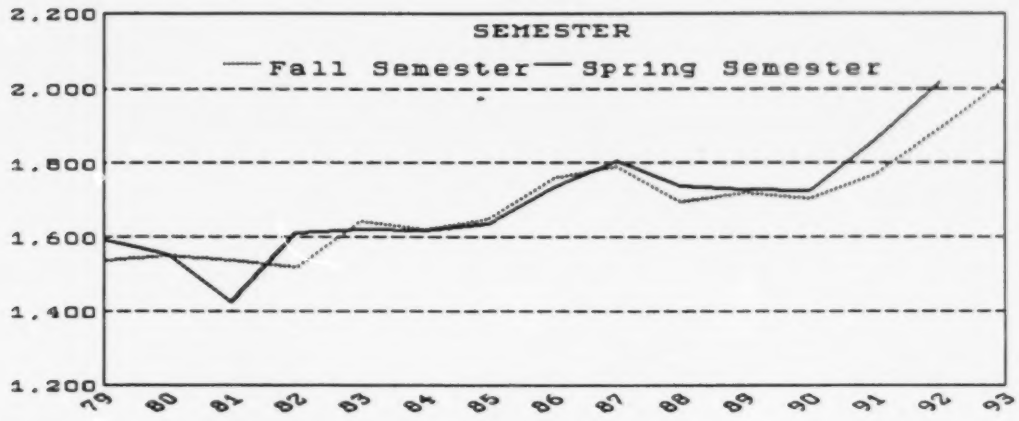

Figure 1. *Kent Trumbull Enrollment 1979 - 1993*

not return to the campus from one semester to another.

The enrollment at Kent Trumbull for the 1992 Fall semester was 1894. Three hundred and thirty three (333) of those students did not return in the 1993 Spring semester.

The enrollment for Kent Trumbull for the 1993 Spring semester was 2017. Four hundred and thirty four (434) of those students did not return to Kent Trumbull for the Fall semester 1993.

Combining the two non-returning student populations creates a survey data source of 767 non-returning students. Surveys were sent to each student of the 767 students. Ninety-eight or almost 33% of those surveyed responded.

Survey items examined issues of that included:

Transferring
Completion of requirements
Scheduling conflicts
Family responsibilities
Career changes
Personal illness
Didn't like college
Transportation
Financial

Demographic Characteristics:

The combined population of non-returning students surveyed consisted of: Male - 315 Female - 452

Class rank of non-returning students. Viewing the class rank of non-returning students reveals that freshmen are by far the largest segment of the non-returning population. This is consistent with the published research literature on both the freshmen year and non-returning students. The population most in danger of not returning is first semester freshmen. That is to say students in their first semester are considerably

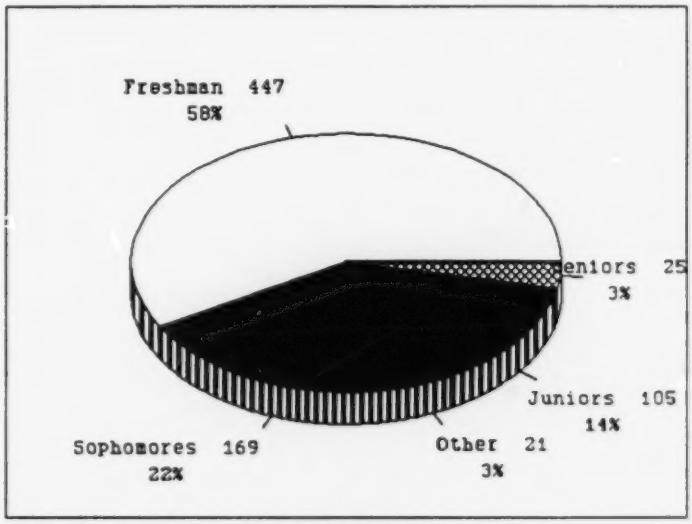

Figure 2. *Class Rank of Non Returning Students*

more sensitive to external pressures affecting their decision to return.

Ethnic identification:

Black (20) ; American Indian/Alaskan (1); Asian/Pacific Islander (2); Hispanic (2); Caucasian/White (308).

High school graduation year: 30 students graduated in 1992; 38 in 1991; 34 in 1990.

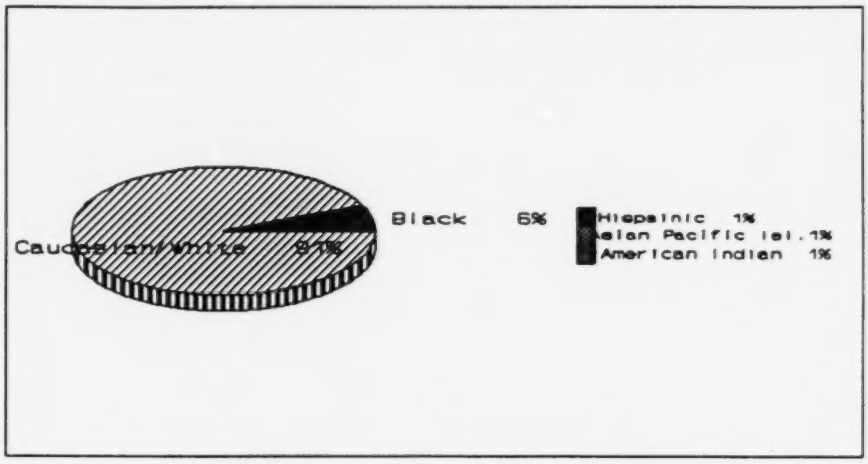

Figure 3. *Ethnic Identification*

The remaining 231 students graduated before 1990. 12 students had no graduation date reported, one hundred (100) graduated before 1980 and 48 graduated before 1970.

The data on the high school graduation year of non-returning

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students indicates that in general, students who delay their entrance into higher education are more sensitive to factors affecting their decision to return to college after completing their first semester. However, it should be noted that a higher proportion of students not entering higher education soon after high school have what has been called "non-traditional" academic goals. These goals often do not include consistent progress to a degree. Often adult students enroll and register for classes with no degree program intentions. Consequently, when assessing non- returning students, graduation year conclusions gleaned from the data should not be considered conclusive.

A look at the high schools from which non- returning students graduated, reveals little in terms of trends or identifying any specific problem areas. An area to explore in further study of non-traditional students will be high school

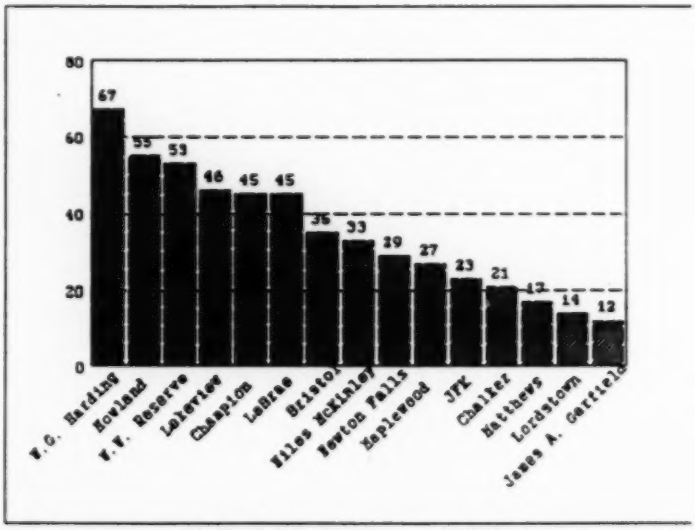

Figure 4. *High Schools From Which Non Returning Students Graduated*

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background. That is, to collect information on the high school academic preparation of students who do not persist at the University. High school preparation could then be used as a variable for measurement of its correlation to persistence. Though we would expect incomplete or unsatisfactory high school preparation to correlate highly to choices not to return to college, no prediction of persistence using high school preparation can be made without more formal analysis.

An analysis of identified majors of non-returning students reveals that students who are undecided are at a greater risk to not return to college.

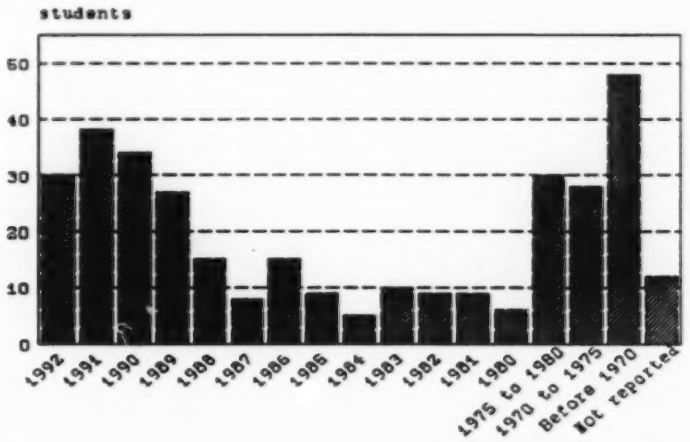

Figure 5. ***High School Graduation Year of Non Returning Students***

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ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESPONSE DATA

Responses were grouped into four general categories:

Transfers

Scheduling difficulties

Family responsibilities;

Financial reasons

I. TRANSFERS - A total of forty (40) students transferred to other institutions, eighteen students in the Fall 92/Spring 93 non-returning group indicated transferring to other institutions. Twenty-two students from the Spring 93/Fall 93 indicated that they had transferred to another institution. (The data from these surveys were included in our investigation of Kent Trumbull student transfer behavior).

II. SCHEDULING DIFFICULTIES - This category includes responses that identify some aspect of time scheduling as the primary reason for not returning. Thirty students from the Fall92/Spring93 group indicated a problem with scheduling classes as the primary reason for not returning. Eighteen from the Spring/Fall group indicated an inability to schedule

classes because of conflicts. The most often mentioned causes of scheduling difficulties was the conflict with work schedules. Students indicated the need for alternative course offering times because of work schedules. Particularly affected by scheduling difficulties are students working non-conventional, rotating and inconsistent schedules. Students reported the desire for expanded course offerings to accommodate scheduling conflicts; these suggestions include expanded course offerings in the evening hours, a full schedule of weekend course offerings and specifically mentioned courses.

The responses reflecting work schedule difficulties included the following:

Unpredictable work hours
Work schedule of 3:30pm to 12:00 midnight
Working 1pm to 8pm
Classes not offered after 3pm
Working 12 noon to 8pm
I work three turns; it got too difficult to go to school.
Evening classes after 8pm and more weekend classes.

Students made specific suggestions about times and specific course offerings. The following are representations of responses in this category. These courses were specifically requested to be offered in the evening:

Developmental Math (A&S 10004)
Physical Education classes offered in the evening.
Technical Math II (19002) after 4pm
Frontiers of Astronomy
Biology II
Calculus I offered at night
Introduction to Graphic Design
Art classes especially Art History II
BMRT 21006, BMRT 21008, BMRT 21050 offered early enough to fit into my schedule.
Nautilus Exercises: more sections
Photography
More Education courses

III. FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES - The total number of survey responses from both survey groups in this category was fifty-three. Responses were divided into several recurring themes:

Child Care needs
Elder Care needs
Family and personal illness/accident

Responses identifying some aspect of child care as the major reason for not returning include:

Trouble finding a reliable baby sitter

I am on welfare & can't afford to pay a baby sitter, my mom is my only baby sitter but she just got a job.

Child care, I wish there were child care available at the campus.

Pregnant, plus care for a pre-schoolers, I would have missed too much of class.

I had to take classes at night with no one to baby sit my son and he is having problems in school and I needed to stay at home to help him.

I could not find a baby sitter.

I had to take classes at night and there was no one to help my son with his homework.

I would not be able to attend many classes because of conflict of schedule with two children attending other colleges

I have two jobs and run a household.

My son is not in school full time yet & I needed to stay with him rather than a sitter.

School was taking away from time I needed to spend with one of my children who was not doing so well in school.

I have three boys at home and a husband on afternoon shift

Responses identifying elder care as the major cause for not returning:

Taking care of 85 year old father and disabled daughter.

I am taking care of my mother who is very ill, also my children suffered from traumatic effects from grandmothers' illness and needed me at home.

I am working and taking care of my elderly parents

My spouse is ill.

My wife had surgery.

Responses identifying family illness as the major cause for not returning:

My spouse is ill

My wife had surgery

The lack of adequate child care, caring for older members and dealing with illnesses and emotionally difficult life events were given as reasons students did not return to Kent Trumbull.

IV. FINANCIAL REASONS - Combined and individually, this category had the most number of responses. The total number of responses identifying financial reasons as the major cause of students not returning was seventy-six. Fifty responses were reported in this category by the Fall92/Spring93 group and twenty-six by the Spring93/Fall93 group of non-returning students.

The consistent lack of financial resources affects the perceptions of options available.

Researchers, such as Vincent Tinto, S.S. Peng and W.B.Fettersand

L.M. Wenc among others, have found that in general financial aid is not a central element in student persistence. Most of these studies measure the impact of financial aid over a long period of time and use data on students after initial enrollment. Studies have concluded (Jackson and Weathersby 1975; Jackson 1978) that finances affect students decisions to initially enter college as well as where students will attend. These studies show that the affects of finances on student persistence is higher in the early stages of college efforts because:

- the potential benefit of a degree is remote
- uncertainty is high
- the projected cost seems more unfeasible

Tinto (1991) suggests that finances are for most families "at the margin of decision making regarding college attendance" (Tinto page 81). He goes on to say "Though departing students very often cite financial problems as reasons for their leaving, such statements are frequently ex-post-facto forms of rationalization which mask rather than reveal primary reasons for their withdrawal."

Students' perceptions of the relevance of their education are more likely to persist in the face of considerable financial stress. When students do not see how the education they are receiving will impact their lives, their

jobs or their security, even modest financial pressures influence withdrawal. Several researchers have concluded citing financial problems as reasons for departure often is the end product of decisions regarding departure more than it is their origins.

Whatever the exact influences of finances, we do know several things about the financial resources:

- The consistent lack of financial resources affects the perceptions of options available. Over time, inadequate personal financial resources restrict personal visions of future possibilities. This inability to perceive the possibility of personal life alternatives often becomes culturally imbedded in families and circles of influence.

Strategies indicated by these responses include: search for and develop additional need-based tuition support; develop an emphasis on personal financial management for students; continue to increase opportunities for students to gain financial aid information.

Several responses were not grouped into any category. Four responses indicated that they realized college was not for them; one response named transportation difficulties as the reason for not returning; and nine students indicated career changes as the reason for not returning.

There are several general conclusions that can be drawn from both the accumulated results and the comparison of the two survey group responses.

This study of non-returning Kent Trumbull students provides a glimpse at the reasons students do not return. As the responses indicate, students decide not to return primarily because the expense is beyond their resources; they have responsibilities within their families; they are unable to schedule because of work, class times and course selections; and/or because they transfer. Strategies that would most affect the non-returning population are those designed to provide and/or increase direct student supports i.e. child care, psychological counseling and increased financial aid opportunities.

Additionally, the survey results indicate increasing and varying course offerings and scheduling, particularly in the evening and on the weekends, would provide students with alternatives to not returning.

A continued investigation and expanded research of the factors affecting student choices not to return to college is an essential component for developing strategies that will impact students decisions to persist in their academic efforts.